# Trigger Warning K

The AC should have come with a trigger warning. Being triggered brings back repressed traumatic memories—providing a warning is the only way for them to regain control over whether and how they wish to participate.

#### McCudden[[1]](#footnote-1)

It's a small but important win in terms of awareness for the causes of both feminism and mental health that "trigger warnings" are now reasonably common online. Yet they're not used by the majority of bloggers, and show no real signs of moving beyond the blogosphere. Not only that, but they are often met with curious levels of resistance, even derision, from entirely sensible, compassionate people. It matters a great deal, and we should say so, because trigger warnings are invaluable. They allow a little bit of control over what you choose to look at; enough to make all the difference between participating in communities, discussions, blogs, and other life-changing support networks, or avoiding them. Support networks are lost to victims, and important voices of experience are lost to the support networks.¶ "Triggering", of course, usually happens as a symptom of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Anyone suffering from PTSD - whether they've been officially diagnosed with it or not - will understand what "triggering" is immediately, but the more painful the trigger, the worse it is to explain, so we're often left with a vague argument about "offensive topics" versus "freedom of speech" which is, although interesting, almost entirely irrelevant to trigger warnings.¶ A call for trigger warnings is not indicative of moral outrage, humour failure, or a plea for censorship. Triggering is more like a chemical reaction, or a phobia, than personal distaste. It's not moral, or emotional. It's medical.¶ Sometimes it's explained like this. If there's a trauma you've had trouble processing, vivid depictions of similar traumas can remind you of it. Well, yes, they can. But this, while horrible, isn't quite what triggering is. When something triggers repressed memories, they stream into your consciousness without your consent. It doesn't just remind of you what happened; it actually makes you re-live it. You feel like you're experiencing the incident again, in real life - until it stops.¶ It's nothing to do with being offended, or having hurt feelings. If you suffer from PTSD, you probably handle being extraordinarily "upset" most days without so much as a sneeze. But the impact of being hit with an unexpected trigger is much worse than being "upset." You might feel sick. You might get a migraine. You might shut down emotionally, you not be able to stay in control of your temper, or your tears. You might black out momentarily, or even forget who, or where, you are. When that happens in a controlled environment or in a safe place with people you trust it's bad enough but if it's happening in the middle of the street, or in a meeting, or when you're standing on the tube with strangers in your personal space, or on a date, or in a job interview, or when you're babysitting, or when you're driving, or...?¶ Identifying something as a potential likely trigger is not the same as passing a moral judgment, and nor is it a call for the item to be censored. Writers who handle an issue like rape sympathetically and intelligently still often choose to carry trigger warnings, because they know that acknowledging a potential trigger is not a value judgment on the content. You can absolutely love something, but still find it triggers for you.¶ And content warnings aren't a radical concept. Films, video games, even music albums carry advisory labels; news readers tell you if the report coming up might distress you, so it's not like we don't already understand and accept the idea anyway. ¶ All trigger warnings do is acknowledge that there are different sorts of horror, and they're not all measurable by things like age. If a record label is going to warn me that Eminem will use a swear word, why not warn me that he's going to depict a rape scene? If Facebook is going to protect people from breastfeeding images in case we find those offensive, surely they could warn us if we're about to click on a page with vivid rape stories, in case that makes us unwell? ¶ So trigger warnings are nothing to do with censorship. If anything, they're the opposite of censorship. If you're interested in free choice and free speech, then trigger warnings are a way to protect those principles. Giving people a trigger warning is simply giving them information. Not giving one because you didn't think of it or didn't know about them is different - I've done that myself. But knowing about them, and choosing not to use them, because you have an idea in your head about censorship and freedom? That's just deliberately denying people information that might help them make an important choice. And there are loads of reasons why people might do that, of course. But none of them have anything to do with freedom.

A failure to include trigger warnings makes debate actively unsafe. This turns case—it makes your methodology inaccessible and the purpose of the AC impossible by publically ousting individuals who have experienced similar forms of violence.

#### Stavvers[[2]](#footnote-2)

Oh dear, Vagenda. This week, one of the authors has come out against trigger warnings. Her reasoning? She had PTSD, and doesn’t like them because she prefers to confront her problems, and also the internet isn’t a safe space.¶ For the first point, good for her. Seriously, good for Rhiannon, and I’m glad that she’s fairly on top of her mental health problems and has found a way to live with them and deal with them. She’s one of the fortunate ones: many others are not in this position. There are many who would rather avoid seeing things which remind them of trauma, many who would like to be able to close the tab and get on with their day, instead of inadvertently reliving horrors.¶ And it’s these people who I’m thinking about when I put trigger warnings at the top of things I have written. If I’ve helped even one person avoid pain, then I am glad. It’s a little thing for me to do, which can make the all the difference for some people.¶ Trigger warnings are not for yourself; they’re for others. And if Rhiannon from Vagenda prefers not to avoid things, she can use the trigger warnings to seek out content to expose herself to as part of her own personal healing.¶ Rhiannon uses the metaphor of epilepsy to illustrate her point that the internet isn’t a safe space: that, for all the warnings about strobe lights, epilepsy can be triggered by light flickering through the trees. It’s worth noting here only a very small fraction of people with epilepsy are triggered by strobing effects. I’m not, and I’ve had several hours of being hooked up to gooey electrodes staring into a flashing light to prove it. When I was younger and newly-diagnosed, I used to hate that they would put the “epilepsy warning” up before films and plays and so forth, because I had epilepsy and didn’t have a problem with flashing lights. It annoyed the fuck out of me. Then I started thinking of other people, and I realised these warnings weren’t for me, but were hugely valuable for others. The same is true of trigger warnings.¶ And yes, they’re imperfect. Everything is, at the moment. I’ve sat in meetings riddled with manarchists complaining about the need for safer spaces policies, because there’s no such thing as a safe space.¶ No. There isn’t. But that doesn’t mean we should use that as an excuse to stop trying and stop using these interim measures which do help.¶ If you read the comments on the Vagenda piece, you will see people who find trigger warnings a vastly helpful resource in mitigating effects of mental health problems and being able to make decisions. These are the people I am thinking about when I defend trigger warnings, even as my own personal abuse triggers are never covered in trigger warnings.¶ The Vagenda piece begins with a dog-whistle complaint about people being mean to Julie Bindel and Suzanne Moore, who joked about trigger warnings after both of them exhibited startling levels of transphobia. In the last paragraph is another point:¶ Often, it is coupled with a sense of passive aggressive glee (“um. You should have put a trigger warning on that”).¶ This, perhaps, betrays more of the backlash from the privileged over being called out, and I do wonder how much of it was the motivating factor behind the commissioning, writing and existence of the piece. Trigger warnings are hardly complicated. Think of common scenarios that might fuck someone up, and if you write about it, stick a line at the top that you’ll be talking about this. If you’ve missed something which is triggering and someone says so, you lose nothing by doing popping in that simple little line.¶ It astounds me that people are kicking and screaming against something so simple which can make the difference between suffering and being all right. It astounds me that some are being flippant about it, laughing and joking over something which is easy, yet so important.¶ Yes, trigger warnings aren’t the magic bullet. But they’re [are] an interim demand which can help make many feel ever so slightly safer in a fundamentally unsafe world.

Whether the judge can evaluate who is doing the better debating presumes equal ability to debate and gain access to the ballot. Above all else, debate is a space for inclusion and acceptance but you have made the debate an actively violent space—thus the prima facie role of the ballot is to maintain the safety of the debate space—it’s a voting issue since it’s a prerequisite to debate itself—the judge cannot evaluate who is winning on another layer of the flow if you exclude certain voices.

#### Teehan**[[3]](#footnote-3)**

Honestly, I don't think that 99% of what has been said in this thread so far actually matters. It doesn't matter whether you think that these types of assumptions should be questioned. It doesn't matter what accepting this intuition could potentially do or not do. It doesn't matter if you see fit to make, incredibly trivializing and misplaced I might add, links between this and the Holocaust. **All** of the **arguments** that talk about how debate is a unique space for questioning assumptions **make an assumption of safety**. They say that this is a space where one is safe to question assumptions and try new perspectives. **That is not true** for everyone. **When we allow arguments that question the wrongness of [exclusion]** racism, sexism, homophobia, rape, lynching, etc., **we make debate unsafe** for certain people. The idea that debate is a safe space to question all assumptions is the definition of privilege, it begins with an idea of a debater that can question every assumption. **People who face the actual effects** of the aforementioned things **cannot question** those **assumptions, and making debate** a space **built around the idea that they can is hostile**. So, you really have a choice. Either 1) say that you do not want these people to debate so that you can let people question the wrongness of everything I listed before, 2) say that you care more about letting debaters question those things than making debate safe for everyone, or 3) make it so that saying things that make debate unsafe has actual repercussions. On "debate is not the real world". **Only for people who can separate their existence in "the real world" from their existence in debate**. That means privileged, white, heterosexual males like myself. I don't understand how you can make this sweeping claim when some people are clearly harmed by these arguments. At the end of the day, **you have to figure out whether you care about debate being safe for everyone** involved. I don't think anyone has contested that these arguments make debate unsafe for certain people. If you care at all about the people involved in debate then don't vote on these arguments. If you care about the safety and wellbeing of competitors, then don't vote on these arguments. If you don't, then I honestly don't understand why you give up your time to coach and/or judge. The pay can't be that good. I don't believe that you're just in it for the money, which is why I ask you to ask yourselves whether you can justify making debate unsafe for certain people.

# **Extensions**

#### The 1AC should have come with a trigger warning and failure to do so means you should vote negative – a) Teehan says that the prima facie role of the ballot is to maintain the safety of the debate space, and b) this turns case—you publically oust the very individuals you purport to help, who have had experienced similar forms of violence.

1. Louise McCudden. “Trigger warnings are nothing to do with censorship. They give people more choice, not less.” The F word Blog. March 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Stavvers. “The value of trigger warnings.” 29 January 2013. <http://stavvers.wordpress.com/2013/01/29/the-value-of-trigger-warnings/>) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ryan Teehan [NSD staffer and competitor from the Delbarton School] – NSD Update comment on the student protests at the TOC in 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)